

Assessing how rainfall and other environmental factors affect the level of *E. coli* contamination in two species of bivalve.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to obtain an understanding of the association between environmental variables, particularly rainfall and the faecal contamination of bivalve shellfish. Diffuse pollution is an important source of this contamination, in which the transfer of faecal bacteria from land downstream to coastal waters is exacerbated by the magnitude of rainfall and other environmental factors. Oysters (*Crassostrea gigas*) and mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) were set up on a small intertidal oyster farm that received inputs from two streams draining a headwater agricultural catchment. The oysters/mussels, stream and seawater were sampled under rainfall event and baseline conditions for bacteriological quality using the faecal indicator bacteria *Escherichia coli*. Turbidity (NTU) and total suspended solids (TSS, mg l^{-1}) were also monitored. Further, in situ measurements were recorded which included; temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$), salinity (ppt) flow rate (ms^{-1}) and flow depth (m).

Flow rate, flow depth, turbidity and TSS were significantly correlated with rainfall in both streams and regression analysis showed that the preceding 12 hour rainfall and turbidity could explain 68.3% of the variability of *E. coli* found in stream one ($F = 21.51$, $p = <0.001$), whereas in stream two, preceding 12 hour rainfall and total suspended solids could explain 66.5% of the *E. coli* present ($F = 19.86$, $p = <0.001$). Levels of *E. coli* in the surrounding seawater were significantly correlated with preceding 12 hour rainfall ($R = 0.530$, $p = <0.05$). No significant relationships were found between rainfall and levels of *E. coli* in mussels and seawater ($F = 8.22$, $p = <0.05$). Overall, oysters exhibited higher levels of *E. coli* than Mussels but no significant relationship could be found with environmental variables to explain these elevated *E. coli* values. The data highlights the need for future sampling strategies to be tailored to individual species (Oysters, Mussels or other bivalves) and suggests that several rainfall events are required in order to capture the variability in bivalve response to rainfall through the year.

Contents

Contents.....	2
List of table and figures	4
Section one –Literature Review	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Aims and Objectives	11
3. Factors influencing transport of <i>E. coli</i> from land to water	12
3.1 Rainfall characteristics	12
3.2.1 Sewage treatment plants, combined sewer overflows and other sewage sources.	14
3.3 Diffuse pollution, land use and land management.....	17
3.3.1 Diffuse septic systems	17
3.3.2 Wildlife	19
3.3.2 Livestock	20
3.3.3 Farm Yard Manures (FYM) Slurries and Dirty Water Runoff	23
3.3.4 Application of faecal bacteria to land.	26
3.3.6 Soil erosion and topography.....	29
4. Factors affecting the survival of <i>E. coli</i> in water.....	29
4.1 Sediment properties/ characteristics.....	29
4.2 Salinity.....	31
4.3 Potential Hydrogen (pH)	33
4.4 Sunlight and Temperature	34
4.5 Turbidity and Total Suspended Solids.....	36
4.6 Predation.....	37
4.7 Hydrographic Factors	38
5. Factors affecting the uptake and elimination of <i>E. coli</i> in bivalves.	39
5.1 Temperature and filtration rate	39
5.2 Salinity.....	41
7. Conclusions	42
8. References	44
Section two – Research Project.....	53
Abstract	54
1. Introduction.....	55
2. Materials and methods.....	59
2.1 Study Area	59
2.2 Site selection criteria	60

2.3 Site Set-up	67
2.3 Sampling.....	69
2.3.1 Water quality monitoring.....	69
2.3.2 Shellfish sampling.....	71
2.3.3 Sediment sampling.....	71
2.4 Laboratory Analysis.....	72
2.4.1 Water samples.....	72
2.4.2 Shellfish samples.....	72
2.4.3 Sediment samples.....	73
2.4.4 Transport of samples.....	73
2.5 Data Analysis	74
2.5.1 Quality control and exploration of the data	74
2.5.2 Hypothesis testing using stream data	75
2.5.3 Hypothesis testing using seawater and shellfish data	77
3. Results.....	78
3.1 Water and Shellfish Quality.....	78
3.2 Sediments.....	88
3.3 Summary of results	90
4. Discussion.....	92
4.1 Effects if the selected environmental factors on the levels of <i>E. coli</i> found in streams one and two (addressing hypotheses H1-H4)	92
4.2 Effects of selected environmental factors on the levels of <i>E. coli</i> in seawater and the uptake in oysters and mussels (addressing hypotheses H5-H10).	96
4.3 Sediments and <i>E. coli</i> levels, before and after rainfall (addressing hypotheses H11 – H12)	100
5. Conclusions	102
6. Limitations to study and further work	103
7. Acknowledgements	104
8. References.....	105
Appendix one	110
Appendix two	116
Appendix three.....	117

List of table and figures

Section One:

Figures

Figure 1: Conceptual diagram of the transfer and fate of *E. coli*10

Tables

Table 1: Summary of levels of faecal coliforms discharging from different sewage treatment processes.....15

Table 2: Faecal coliform output of four Gull species20

Table 3: Faecal and total coliforms discharged from different animal species per day22

Table 4: Survival times of *E. coli* O157:H7 in different types of manure storage methods..... 25

Table 5: Field capacity, wilting points and available water values for different soil types.....26

Table 6: Levels of faecal coliforms found between sediment and the overlying water31

Table 7: Filtration rates of Mussels (*M. edulis*) and Pacific oysters (*C. gigas*).....40

Section Two:

Figures

Figure 1: Map of study area59

Figure 2: Distribution of daily rainfall by month from Skipness house (2003-2007).....62

Figure 3: Daily rainfall values from Skipness house (September, October, November)63

Figure 4: Survey map of catchment (sources of contamination)65

Figure 5: Map of sampling locations68

Figure 6: Time series plot of rainfall and relationship between *E. coli* and flow rate in stream one and two79

Figure 7: Time series plot of rainfall and *E. coli* levels found in oysters, mussels and seawater85

Figure 8: Geometric mean of *E. coli* levels found in seawater, oyster and mussel samples..... 87

Figure 9: Daily rainfall values from Lochgilphead and onsite weather station88

Tables

Table 1: Scientific and logistical criteria used for site selection.....60-61

Table 2: Field and sanitary survey observations66

Table 3: Geometric mean of <i>E. coli</i> results for the identified areas of contamination	78
Table 4: Summary statistics of environmental variables measured in both streams	80
Table 5: Correlation coefficients between <i>E. coli</i> concentrations and environmental variables	82
Table 6: Spearman rank correlations between environmental variables in both streams.....	83
Table 7: Regression analysis for stream one and two.....	84
Table 8: Faecal loadings per day for stream one and two.....	84
Table 9: Correlation coefficients between preceding rainfall and levels of <i>E. coli</i> in seawater, oysters and mussels.....	86
Table 10: Analysis of <i>E. coli</i> levels found in different sediment types.....	89
Table 11: Analysis of <i>E. coli</i> levels found in sediment before and after rainfall.....	90